

Short Biography of Tenia Jenkins

by former student teacher Virginia Ravenscroft-Scott

Mary Martenia Jenkins was born in a small town in Mississippi, into a family of leaders and educators who owned and farmed their own land. She inherited their commitment to justice and passion for education. As a child, Tenia and her brothers and sisters attended segregated schools and picked cotton to help support their family, but as she grew older, the Civil Rights Movement brought many changes to their lives.

Tenia saw her family and neighbors risking their lives to defend Freedom Riders; after the Supreme Court ordered desegregation of schools, Tenia was selected by her community, along with several cousins, to be among the first Black students to begin attending the previously all-white high school. She was chosen because adults felt that Tenia's courage, character, and intelligence would enable her to weather the storms of racism in that situation, and not only to survive, but to make them all proud. Indeed, they were correct in this assessment: despite daily harassment and attacks of all kinds, Tenia and her cousins persevered and graduated.

Tenia entered the University of Wisconsin in Madison with the goal of continuing her family's legacy of service to humanity through teaching or social work. She graduated with her teaching certification in 1972 and became a social studies teacher at Madison East High School, where she taught courses on global history and cultures, and also created the district's first classes (in a traditional high school context) in Black Studies, Women's Studies, and African American History.

A new chapter began in 1982 when Tenia moved to Malcolm Shabazz City High School, an alternative program for students who have struggled in traditional settings. The Shabazz mission statement describes an anti-harassment learning environment, with a strong sense of community, high expectations for achievement, personalized instruction, and student participation in school decision-making. Service Learning is a cornerstone, as are connections between the school, students, their families and the community.

At Shabazz, Tenia continued her leadership and innovation, designing classes on a variety of topics, including history, global studies, women's studies and Black studies classes. She also took on a role as the coordinator for services to students of color, working with colleagues and parents to meet students' needs in any way possible. Tenia earned the respect of her colleagues, parents, students, and the community for her great dedication to her students and her constant determination to do all in her power to support their success.

Several of the classes that Tenia designed particularly stand out as lasting contributions to the curriculum at Shabazz. One of these is the "Mirrors of Discrimination" class, which Tenia created and worked with colleagues to develop. "Mirrors" became a required course for all Shabazz students and remains the only *required* anti-discrimination class in Madison's public schools. In this class, students explore ethnic heritage and identity, beginning with their own, and learn about the struggles and contributions of various groups in American society. Students finish the class with the service learning project of teaching elementary students about fighting against discrimination and for social justice.

Another of Tenia's lasting curricular contributions to Shabazz is "Study Skills for Academic Success," a class she designed specifically to build resilience in students who have struggled academically in the past. While studying for her master's degree, Tenia redesigned the class based

on her research, and wrote a handbook that would allow the class to continue after her retirement. In the "Study Skills" class, students practice key study skills and receive assistance with their academic work. As part of the class, the teachers monitor students' performance in all their classes and provide support and reinforcement. The class is offered every quarter; high demand has resulted in additional classes with specific areas of focus (such as writing and math). Successful students are rewarded with credit that counts toward graduation.

"Education for Justice," another of Tenia's landmark achievements at Shabazz, was a series of service learning classes dedicated to social justice. Tenia collaborated with three colleagues for twenty years on these classes, each of which involved a long-term field trip to such locations as the Mississippi Delta, the Menominee Indian Nation, and the Appalachian Mountains. Over two hundred students have taken one of the "Education for Justice" classes; many have contacted Tenia in later years to describe the long-term impact of their experiences on these journeys.

Throughout all her years of teaching, Tenia's commitment to her students was also expressed through a commitment to mentoring teacher education students, including at least thirty practicum students and more than sixty student teachers. Tenia wanted to share her experience, knowledge and skills in order to help as many teachers as possible become effective teachers for *all* students, including students of color. Even during an eighteen-month battle with cancer, Tenia continued to mentor student teachers because this part of her work was so important to her.

Tenia was excited about retirement, not because she planned to slow down at all, but because it would allow her to bring her energy and commitment to new arenas. She moved from Shabazz over to West High School, where she initiated the Pilot Project for African-Centered Pedagogy and Curriculum. Housed in a beautiful room that Tenia redesigned as the Multicultural Academic Achievement Center, the Project includes three classes that bring together African American adults and children in a positive setting. Based on the research of Gloria Ladson-Billings and Peter C. Murrell, building relationships between adults and students fosters academic engagement and achievement, and challenges students to meet high standards out of respect for and pride in themselves and their heritage.

In addition to all her commitment and dedication as a professional, Tenia has volunteered her time to increase educational opportunities and support the educational achievement of African American students in Madison. She has served several terms as president of the African American Educators Association, and while her sons were attending West High School, she organized parents there into an advocacy and support group called Parents of African American Students. Currently she works with Madison Area Family Advocacy and Advisory coalition, which supports African American students and their families throughout the Madison area.

In another far-reaching volunteer effort, Tenia co-founded the African American Ethnic Academy, a "Saturday school" for African American students, designed to teach children about their heritage and strengthen their academic skills. In the sixteen years since its founding, the academy has served several hundred children from age three through high school; many of the children return as adults to help teach the next generation. Tenia continues to serve on the board.

It has been a long road from the dusty cotton fields to the respect and appreciation that Tenia has earned from the whole education community in Madison, and along the way, Tenia's life-long passion for justice and education has enabled her to touch literally thousands of lives. As her work continues, we salute her with gratitude and admiration.